MSc in Social Science
Management of Creative Business Processes (CBP)

BRAND IDENTITIES BEHIND ONLINE COMMUNITIES
Conceptualizations and Empirical Research

Master thesis
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Total number of characters: 143,723
Total number of pages: 78
Hand in date: 2 December 2015

COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL
2015
ABSTRACT

Due to dramatic global growth of social media, marketing practitioners view social media as a compulsory element of their marketing strategies to share content, connect with audiences and build Brand Identity. Almost every brand has already set up a profile on the mainstream Social Media platforms; currently, there are many brands that turn to more novel platforms like Instagram. However, the challenge most companies face is that although they recognize market trends and a need to be present on those Social Media platforms, they do not truly understand how to leverage such channels for building Brand Identity and what it ultimately means for their Brand Equity. Due to lack of scholarly interest and empirical support, the nature of online Brand Identity and its relation to online communities on Social Media platforms still remains quite vague as well its capability to enhance Corporate Brand Equity and Customer Relationships is still largely unclear and challenging. Therefore, the thesis contributes to a field of online communities by addressing the conceptual changes in Brand Identity formation processes within the context of online communities on Social Media platforms and confirms it through the empirical analysis on online Brand behaviour on Social Media. To assist Brand Managers, the thesis uses an empirical case study for monitoring brand efforts to leverage the Social Media platform Instagram. Lastly, the findings are presented, which most importantly suggest using Brand-as-Person approach for building strong Brand Identity on online Social Media platforms. Among the many possible outcomes on Brand Equity, the findings far and foremost demonstrate that self-expressive and emotional benefits of value proposition for the customers lead to the stronger consumer relationship. Finally, the study is concluded with several managerial insights for marketing practitioners.

Keywords: online communities and networks, brands, social media, networked individualism, Brand-as-Person, Brand Identity, consumer relationships.
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1. INTRODUCTION

“When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other”

Eric Hoffer (1902-1983)

1.1. Research Problem

In this digital era in most industries today Social Media is considered to be part of an Online Ecosystem involving elements of both traditional and digital media (Hannaa, Rohma, & Crittendenb, 2011). While Web and digitalization allow many unique features such as interactivity, personalization, e-mail, newsletters and other useful and widely used applications for branding, Social Media has brought to discussion new concepts, such as User Generated Content (UGC), consumer engagement, virtual communities, opinion leaders and followers, users and influencers, real time creation and other, among academic and industry researchers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Social Media platforms, also usually called Social Network Sites (SNS), have incorporated new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo or video sharing and, thus, allowed not only traditional Business to Consumer (B2C) but also utilized Consumer to Business (C2B) and Consumer to Consumer (C2C) communications to build Brand Identity (Qualman, 2012).

Due to dramatic global growth of Social Media, such as Facebook (1.4+ billion users) and Twitter (300+ million users) (Appendix1), marketing practitioners from different companies, neither limited to size nor industry, view Social Media as a compulsory element of their Marketing strategies to communicate, connect with audiences and build Brand Identity. However, it is no longer enough to incorporate Social Media as one integral and compact element of a Marketing plan. Social Media has become part of a more complex and networked social structure. Since the world’s online presence as well as mobile device popularity is
constantly growing and consumers are craving for interconnectivity more than ever, the rationale for more innovate Social Media Marketing is even stronger.

Even though almost every brand has already set up a profile on the mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter; currently, there are many brands that turn to more novel platforms such as Instagram or Foursquare in hope to stay even more connected and reach new audiences (Miles, 2014). According to the latest statistics, it is the Niche Social Networks like Pinterest, Instagram and Tumble that are on top of the list of the fastest growing Social Media platforms in terms of user growth worldwide (Appendix 2). In fact, they continue to bloom even when the biggest social networks as Facebook and Twitter incorporate more elements of social sharing into their platforms, e.g. Facebook added images to the commenting features in June 2013; Twitter followed by adding images to the stream just a few months later (Examiner, 2015).

Due to human nature to connect with the similar ones, in the modern Information age people tend to make online connections with others based on similar interests, hobbies and tastes. Consequently, they form networks of such connections (Aiello, 2012). Niche Social Media platforms create means for such specialized communication. For instance, current leading Niche Social Media Networks are built around the idea of image sharing. Only on Instagram roughly 5 million images are shared every day and the number is only expected to increase. It is projected that merely in the United States in 2016 Instagram is going to reach 89.4 million monthly active users (Appendix 3). Such continuously growing number of new and active users proves that to capture and share life through images has become a new evolution of social networking (Miles, 2014). The latter draws our attention to the importance of visual stimuli of communication. For instance, even though Brands are still newbies to Instagram (according to statistics only app. 30% of all socially active brands have a profile on Instagram (Goodman & Yuki, 2014)),
Instagram is on a list of the top ten Social Media platforms used by businesses worldwide (Appendix 4). These observations reveal a great opportunity for the early adapters to reach niche audiences. Therefore, visual aspect of communication is brought onto the top of agenda for many Marketing Managers today. It seems like “seeing is believing” (Witten & Knudsen, 2005) is an idiom, which catches a great deal of interest of marketing practitioners nowadays as a result of the rise of online social media platforms and its focus on the visual aspects of communication. Nevertheless, if “the most powerful, meaningful, and culturally important messages are the ones that combine words and pictures equally and respectfully” (Lester, 2013), it is important for the Marketers to find the best ways to combine both written text and visual aspects of communication into their Social Media channels.

However, the main challenge most companies face is that although they recognize trends on the market and a need to be present on those Social Media platforms, they do not truly understand how to utilize the elements of Social Media channels effectively and leverage them for Brand Identity building purposes as well as what effect their online behaviour creates on Brand Equity. It seems like there is a lack of consensus in conceptualizations and support of empirical evidence in the academic literature of the nature of the Identity formation processes in the Social Media context and its relation to the structures around. In the academic Marketing literature, processes of building online Brand Identity involve a complex of elements (Kvale, 2007), while it might seem that these Social Media platforms only promote on a few main features: ”Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever” (FAQ, Instagram). Therefore, in order to build strong Brand Identity, it is essential to understand the complex structure of a Social Media platform, its overall possibilities as well as its relation and dependency on the social structures around. However, yet, there are only a few studies in the Social Science and Marketing Management literature that help explain Identity
formation processes in the Social Media context and the effects on the Corporate Brand Equity. Due to lack of scholarly interest and empirical support, the nature of online Brand Identity in the Social Media context remains quite vague and its capability to enhance a Corporate Brand Identity and Customer Relationships remains unclear and challenging. Employing the new Social Media opportunities requires a deeper knowledge of how companies interact on such platforms and what it ultimately means for the brands.

1.2. Aim of the study

The thesis aims to discuss the conceptual Identity formation processes and its changes in regards to New Social Media. First, to describe the relevant ideas introduced by sociologist Anthony Giddens on the nature of Identity, self-expression and agency within the context of online structures. Also, to explore the ideas of Barry Wellman and Manuel Castells on Identity formation in regards to Network Society from Sociological and Socio-Psychological perspective. Consequently, to apply these understandings on empirical analysis of Brand related Social Media. In particular, niche Social Media Networks, which are primarily focused on a particular topic, like Instagram focused on image or digital photography sharing. Finally, to draw a conclusion of the effects on Brands, specifically Brand Identity and Brand Equity in Marketing and Management.

To assist Brand Managers, the thesis builds a case for monitoring brand behaviour on social media platform Instagram, focusing on interactions and ways of communication in communities, also known as networks. It elaborates on the established behavioural patters in terms of Brand Identity formation process. Lastly, it presents the possible outcomes on the Brand Equity and provides implications useful for marketing practitioners.
The main research questions to be explored throughout the study:

- How do brands interact in online communities?
- What are the outcomes of such interactions on Brands?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though community and networks are not new concepts in the literature of various academic disciplines, they have only recently emerged in Social Media Marketing. Before 1993 in the field of marketing and management are no in depth academic articles mentioning terms “online social networks” and “virtual communities” found. Rheingold was the first to recognize the shift from organic communities towards impersonal societies in the age of New Media and identified a new form of community - “Online community” (Rheingold, 1993). Generally, Rheingold pays attention to computer-mediated communication, which eventually forms a new culture online. This culture is described as a public exchange from scientific data to even sexual fantasies or political views. With such diminished boundaries in digitalized communication and online connections, constantly switched between multiple networks, it eventually results in formation of new closely bonded online communities. Therefore, it is clear that Internet is what empowers a change from groups to networks and eventually brings a new concept of “online social networks” into discussion (Wellman B., 2001b). Since then, with a rise of Social Media, the term raises a lot of questions of general characteristics of the social networks and communities in the digital era and ends up introducing a new concept of “Networked Individualism” (Castells, 1996). However, despite the significant interest in new terms emerged during the last decade, there have only been a few systematic scholarly attempts to define the ground of this new concept (Wellman B., 2002) in the new Social Media context; elaborate on its distinctiveness from the more traditional concepts, such as community, engagement; finally, explore its
relationship with an individual availability of free choice and self-expression within the context of existing agencies, socio-cultural framework and sociality (Willson, 2010).

2.1. Conceptual Foundation of Identity in Sociology and Social Psychology

In order to provide relevant insights into the shifts described above, conceptual foundations of identity and its relationship to society in general are identified and explored in the academic literature. There identity is described as a “continuum ranging from personal to social identity” (Tajfel, 1981) in Social Psychology and as a concept involving features both from individual personality to interpersonal relationships and social elements. This is the reason why identity is a broad definition that includes both personal and social elements of the others. Its formation is a complex process, which does not exist “on its own” but is closely related to sociality, i.e. ways we interact, and, yet, the question of how we acquire and form our identities remains and is discussed in many academic disciplines.

When it comes to theories and discussions in Social Science, weather it is a structure or an agency that is shaping our human behaviour, one of the most influential theorist Karl Marx introduces Collective Identity theory, which dispenses individuals and focuses on groups. Marx chooses a perspective that identities are created not by our personal choice but rather under the socio-historical circumstances and are affected by the means and technologies that are available at that particular time (Marx, 1959). Thus, an individual does not purely determine communication, actions and choices of its own. Contrary, Marx believes that a group has its collective consciousness that cannot be understood from actions of its individual members. According to Marx, people form their own identity “under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” (Marx, 1852). Besides the latter, in Marx’s theory of classes, even person’s individual identity is believed to be formed purely by
common interest of social classes of society, which is as an objective and a distinctive factor itself. A new term “consciousness of a class” emerged in the literature of Social Science pointing out that members of each class are aware of their similarities, shared views and common interests. This is a subjective factor of classes and is certainly compatible with a broader socio-political system in which we live in (Marx, 1959).

Another perspective offered by the sociologist Michel Foucault (1988) refers to Marx’s views on class differentiation and draws attention to the “power discourse”, which happens when individuals form their own identities through certain practices, which are enabled through only power relations (Foucault, 1980). Its main principle is that individual identities are constructed as objects for which information is collected, transferred and analysed on constant basis according to shifts and requirements of power positions in their society. Besides, Roy Baumeister believes that institutionalized processes govern transitions through our different stages of life and, thus, an individual role is possible only relatively (Baumeister, 1986). He recalls on the writings of Durkheim (1984) that no real value was placed on individuality in traditional cultures; therefore, attributes of identity, such as social status, gender and other, are relatively fixed. In theory of Methodological Holism (Durkheim, 1984), groups and society themselves are seen distinct from individuals and having their own properties that affect actions of an individual.

However, even though in the pre-modern times emphasis on individuality was absent, Bauman argues that the techniques of power have fundamentally changed with a rise of mass media and were no longer efficient under globalization (Bauman, 1998). Together with many other Social theorists, Bauman points out that digitalization changes formed views on individualism, unique character and potentialities of a character. Mass media has imposed a new model of self-
construction, i.e. people employing media as a vehicle for defining both their cultural and personal identity. People define themselves with characteristics of news, fashion, leisure or other subjects widely discussed on New Media. When the many, the watchers, watch the few, the watched elites, and subsequently admire and follow them, a new form of power positions emerges. This form is known as “opinion leaders” and “followers”, respectively. It introduces an ever evolving global edge on identity formation in the Social Science and Marketing literature (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). Although institutionalized processes and social structures lost its appeal in Information age, mass media as a mean for leadership resembled a situation in which the “followers” were not entirely free of choice and therefore lost independent judgement (Popper, 2001).

There is no surprise that new media offered renewed possibilities for the surveillance of one another, addressed issues concerning new and dynamic roles of self-expression and invited to rethink the theories of classes and agencies versus structures. A well-recognized social theorist Anthony Giddens (1991) used the term "reflexivity" to describe the ability of an agent, so called the individual, to consciously make adjustments of a place in a social structure that he or she belonged to. In his work he points out that globalization and the emerged post-traditional society in digital age allow more social reflexivity: individuals shaping their own values, tastes, politics, desires and using other features of autonomy. Time and space are identified as the two major dimensions of sociological reflexivity (Therborn, 2000). Time is measured by our placement in the historical-social timeline; space refers to three elements of identity: institutions and disciplines, space of daily practices and performances, and, last but not least, space of imagination and investigation (Therborn, 2000). In fact, in the Information Age the space of predominant imagination and investigation, especially the global aspects of it, increases interest of many sociologists. Figure I visualizes the trajectory of space Identity (Therborn, 2000).
Figure 1 above depicts spaces of identity including its turn from the universal to the global one. Globality is part of Modern Sociology and, thus, an important segment of Identity and Social Life. Global sociology differs from universal by bringing issues of global variability, global connectivity and global intercommunication into discussion. A globe or a world is seen as a set of structures interconnected by social and cultural systems and appears not only as a territory of humans in the processes of modernization (Therborn & Immerfall, 2010). Globality also entails new perspectives from the centre point, which communicate to the rest of a world and bring focus away from self-centeredness towards outer spaces and connections, with and between them. In other worlds, there is no longer any starting or centre point, rather networks of global interconnected communication, which eventually changes the processes of Identity formation (Therborn & Immerfall, 2010).

In relation to the processes of globalization and Identity formation, digital exhibitionism is another new concept emerged in the literature of Sociology and Psychology, drawing our attention to the empowerment of self-construction of identity globally and by own preferences. Modernity brought a shift in the identity formation towards the culture of digital exposure (Munar, 2010). Political scientist Ana María Munar in her recent work *Digital Exhibitionism: The Age of Exposure* (Munar, 2010) suggests that new complex technology encourages a trend:
“Online communities and social network platforms are new technological tools mediating in the construction of late modern biographies and that they expand the complexity of today’s socio-technical systems”. When people exhibit their lives to the others, in other words, when they behave in a certain way purposely to attract attention, they are claiming rights to their own lives, thus, they are the ones, who are engaging in a construction of their own identity (Nicolle B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, Cliff Lampe, 2007). Digital era creates better means for self-expression, bringing psychological factors of self-expression, self-realization, equal rights and well being in general into play, e.g. the study of Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites shows that Facebook usage provides greater benefits for the users with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Nicolle B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, Cliff Lampe, 2007) and enables the digitalisation of private life experiences. However, even though the Information age has created more possibilities for the individual content creation, it has also encouraged conspicuous consumption, which is status-driven consumption (Veblen, 1899). In the work of Georgios Patsiaouras and James A. Fitchett The evolution of conspicuous consumption, this concept refers to “the competitive and extravagant consumption practices and leisure activities that aim to indicate membership to a superior social class” (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). When dealing with mass media and social media influences on brand choice decisions, Roger Mason points out that, in many cases, the attractiveness of the source of communication creates consumer identification: consumers purchase a good in order to signal high income and by that achieve greater social status (Mason, 1984). He also points out that not only individuals are affected by conspicuous consumption but also some brands can be identified with such trend (1984):

"...Conspicuous consumption (expressive behaviour) seems to have enabled companies to differentiate brands and inject them with actual or perceived quality differences so that there are
a number of brands that have become status symbols or stereotypes with which to identify and which service the expressive function" (Mason, 1984)

Nonetheless, even though mass media introduces novel concepts on Identity formation, most importantly an individual becomes freer from social structures and is encouraged to pursue one’s own life and inherit human rights. A new trend in Social Science named “Life projects”, contrary to “Development projects”, embodies visions of the world rather than temporary goals of companies (M Blaser, 2004). It is obvious that the early attempts to define Identity relate to the processes of the development of a distinct personality of an individual in relation to the social structures. This results in various forms, such as personal identity, social identity and company identity.

2.2. Identity and New Media Conceptualizations in Social Science and Marketing

Literature

Global Society. With a rise of New Media, new perspectives such as digital Identity emerged in the literature of Social Science and Marketing. While both theorists Marx and Foucault imply that identities are constructed not of free will and liberty, a social theorist Anthony Giddens (1991) brings in a new perspective on identity formation, which looks at identity formation as “dynamic, ever changing and evolving” but not static process. For Giddens, the formation of self-identity is linked to the processes of modernity, such as modifications, reflections, updates, which are the features of the digital age (Giddens, 1991). However, in order to better understand perspectives of the theories of Identity formation proposed by Giddens, it is important to be aware of a broader context of Giddens work and gain insights of the contemporary Sociological theory of Structuration (Giddens, 1984). Giddens introduced the structure duality into Social Sciences, which means that social structures are both the means and the outcome of social
actions. Also agency and structure are mutually integral entities when comparing them to the works of other theorists, such as Marx or Foucault. In other words, a social structure is not independent of the agency, nor is an agency independent of the social structure. They are both interconnected: individuals rely on social structures in their actions and these actions serve to (re)produce social structure at the same time (Giddens, 1984). As a consequence and in comparison to the theories proposed by the other sociologists, Giddens introduces a freer and more independent identity formation process of an individual (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens argues that the main basis of the Identity is information collected from social structures and the environment, which in digital age is extremely rapidly changing with technologies that are constantly evolving. Hence, the traditional identity formation and value formation systems are being transformed according to the globalized digital world. It is the online environment, where in modern times people gain knowledge from, and its consequences that are being felt in spheres from work to private lives, e.g. globalized family values, greater women equality worldwide, increased level of free expression, etc. (Giddens, Runaway world: how globalization is reshaping our lifes, 2002). The individual becomes the one responsible for oneself as a reflexive project: "We are not what we are but what we make ourselves" (Giddens, 2002). As a result, within online media all of the described foundational perspectives of identity formation build on the interactive nature of information exchange between the actors online and their connectivity: the ability to link distant and multiple actors at the same time. The fundamental shift within modern society is what draws our attention from traditional mechanisms and institutions to individualism and interactivity as two crucial attributes of the New Media (Giddens, 1991) and also has wide consequences on Identity formation.
Network Society. Giddens’ insights continue to have a great deal of validity and importance in Social Science, when Castells builds on Giddens views and adds a perspective of *Networked Society* in the Information Age (Castells, 1996). The most recent global trends of information technology, capital and social movements have inspired the wide-ranging work of Manuel Castells, who introduced theories of Network Society in his three volume work collectively titled *The information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996) (1997) (1988) and became one of the most influential theorists of conceptualizing Identity in Modern Social Science. Under Modernity, identity is recognized as part of the process of globalization (Rolandson, 1992); on the other hand, Castells categorizes identity as a project and resistance identities arguing that identity requires different dimensions and reconfiguration of global/ local and time/ space dialect. In other words, identity is the basis of the local reflection on global activities. New media offers us global discourses to re-think of who we are. Thus, new media offers our identity, in relation to the content received or created through new channels. Besides, the dimensions of time, space, and relationally are incorporated into the core conceptualizations of identity. Our identity construction processes are taken beyond physical territories and time limits, e.g. when people share information between continents without any time frame. Further, Castells categorises identities between *project* and *resistance* identities. According to Castells, you are constructing your identity either with an aim to change the world, so you build it according to certain values and ideologies, or you seek recognition to defend and save your own position in the structure or network you belong to (Castells, 1997). From this perspective it can be stated that New Media contributes to intensification of individualism and a rise of personalized culture.

For Castells, technology does not determine society but rather a complex pattern of interactions in the society and, thus, identities cannot exist outside networked technologies (Castells, 1996). To put it differently, technological innovations, such as emails, blogs, social media platforms,
mobile phones, tablets and other, are interconnected. They inevitably are a part of the Self-Identity formation processes. Castells brings in a fundamental change in Identity processes by introducing it to the perspective of the *Networked Society* (1996). According to Castells, our societies settle around the idea of networks, so eventually networks are what replace traditional groups and communities with. *Space of flows* and *timeless time* are the two main attributes of the Networked Society (Castells, 1996). Contrary to the beliefs of Foucault, Castells argues that there are no more power discourses, which are normally operated in the specific locations, so no geographical constraints or time frames and limitations in the age of New Media exist. Implications of Networked Society on personal identity creation conclude that an individual is no longer limited to values, expectations and requirements imposed by socio-cultural context. An individual is invited to explore new practices, platforms and opportunities for self-reflection.

Theorists Sherry Turkle and Donna Haraway bring in new dimensions on understanding the implications of Networked Societies in the identity formation processes. According to Turkle (1995), people have multiple identities, which are enabled by digital age. To put it simply, people have many identities and apply them in accordance to different contexts. People construct those identities consciously by making informed choices in regards to certain situations, e.g. different online environments, such as dating sites, blogging, emails, etc. Additionally, due to anonymity of such identities they juggle between them. Thus, multiplicity, plurality and choice are significant features of identity in online identities, which are the features of identity theories in late post-modernity literature. Another fundamental break in an understanding of Identity formation in relation to the New Media age is introduced by Donna Haraway (Haraway, 2006), who talks about a “cyborg self” referring to a sort of hybrid between humans and machines. Haraway implies that our identities are now a mixture of human and machine characteristics,
meaning that humans use technology to reinvent themselves in one or another way. To conclude, it proves that identities are neither fixed nor stable.

Another perspective of exploring the conceptual foundations of Identity in the New Media context distinguishes between “online selves” and “offline selves”. Due to such scale of freedom found in online environment (Turkle, 1995), it is reasonable to provoke discussions weather online identities correspond with offline ones, presumably the real identities. In the study of Wynn and Katz (1997), it is found that even if Internet, which is virtual space, liberates an individual from its body and provides opportunities of separate existence of multiple aspects of oneself, which can remain discrete (anonymous), people still seem to form a coherent identity across multiple channels and so they stick to their one real identity. The empirical study showed that online identities are adjusted according to the relevant online context, e.g. various home pages, blogs, profiles of specific social sites and other in order to be able to facilitate effective virtual communication. However, such fragmented information allows an imaginary creation of online Identity and, therefore, cannot fully support the real self (Wynn & Katz, 1997)

**Technologies of oneself.** From a more general perspective, New Media and Technologies introduced very specific new ways to “construct ourselves” through blogs and video channels on e.g. Youtube¹ and offered different possibilities for self-realization. Perhaps to better understand the conceptualizations as well as the relationship between Identity and New Media, it is worth taking a look at the technologies of oneself. Technology is mainly meant to form means for Identity creation, which comply with social, cultural, religious, political and other relevant norms of that particular time period. While throughout different historical times the means have been

¹ www.youtube.com
different and always changing, the fundamental question of who we really are has always been relevant in multiple disciplines (Siapera, 2012). Even similar principles were found in early Christian religious practises, which encouraged “soul” search and self-definition in compliance with God’s values. In psychological theory the well-recognized Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) emphasizes the importance of self-actualization and in digital times new technologies only provide the means for it. This leads to an assumption that new features, which New Media brought into discussion, such as global discourses, creation of identities beyond territories, no time frame, reflexivity and other, ultimately have a positive and important contribution to the formation of self-identity in terms of personal growth and self-expression. For instance, blogs create means that technically offer an individual the opportunity to re-imagine and express himself in any topic or virtual reality, such as Second Life. They also provide means to experience oneself in a different environment and possibly encourage redefining one’s Identity. Such features of Identity formation processes are inner-directed (towards oneself) activities (Siapera, 2012). Even though it seems clear that focus remains on the individual but the New Media creates a new dimension of activities as well, which is outer-directed (towards the external world) (Siapera, 2012). The latter takes place when self-actualization is performed publicly, i.e. online with the other individuals involved. This means that people are not only observing but also being actively involved in the online processes through e.g. discussions and/or comments. Another example of outer-directed activities is when individuals aim and, therefore, create strategies of how to get more “friends” and/ or “followers” in order to expand their network. With such actions performed, visibility and popularity come into play as attributes to online Identity (Thompson, 2005). In the article *The New Visibility* (2005) Thompson argues that digital media creates a new form of visibility that is mediated-visibility, which transforms the relations between visibility and power and can even lead to fragility of an individual. An individual cannot fully control its visibility in online environment, e.g. when someone else
leaves a comment on your profile, shares your picture on Social Media sites, etc. This creates a risk that this all can even get out of control. Thus, such social influence can lead to difficulties in managing Identity.

In Social Phycology there are numerous studies on social influence examining how the opinions of others change individual’s behaviour and judgment. Social scientists have developed numerous approaches to understand human behaviour in relation to Society. Classical approaches typically focus on how a membership of individuals within one specific group is affected by the behaviour of those individuals. Such approaches help explain the collective phenomena and still have some validity in the XXI century. Especially in the Eastern societies, it might still be that it is a group, e.g. family, that is linked by networks. While in the contemporary processes of individualism, especially in the Western societies, an individual becomes linked by networks of individuals, who are the basic unit of the networked society. Societies are seen as networks and networks of networks (Wellman B. , Social Structures: A Network Approach, 1988) rather than as bounded groups in hierarchical structures. The new concepts of Network Society developed by Wellman, Castells and other sociologists take a closer look at Social Networks and bring us one step further in understanding individual and human society and are perhaps best suited for the Age of New Media.

2.3. Identity Conceptualizations in Online Social Media context

Before we had Internet and Digital Media, the closest form of communication we had were handwritten letters, newspapers, regular phone calls, meet-ups, etc. These types of offline social interactions typically have more depth and meaning than what we are experiencing online today. Even though Digitalization and a rise of Internet brought a huge advancement in many realms of life, it also brought discussions on implications on our “offline” lives and how it has changed our
perception of ourselves and in relation to others. Among Sociologists and Social Psychologists there have been multiple attempts to define and redefine Identity and Socialites in the context of Digital Age. Many theorists agree that Internet only brings connections and relations to online environment and eventually weakens relations in “offline” reality: Internet’s immersed nature might be so powerful that at times internet users tend to even neglect their family and friends and prefer electronic communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and other leading social platforms, currently, universally called Social Media, have created more social access points and led to growth in usage of such sites at staggering rates (Smith, 2009). Particularly after the creation of Facebook\(^2\), now the leading online social networking service, and its incredibly rapid growth (Appendix 1), many Marketing practitioners were encouraged to recognize a universal need for new types of online communication. Such social technologies enabled social revolution in theories of global community, consumer opinion, social engagement and other traditional concepts in many academic disciplines. New concepts such as virtual community, also known as online community, emerged in the literature of Social Science and Marketing Management and should be discussed into detail in relation to Identity formation within a rise of New Media.

**Redefining communities as networks.** Until digital age brought new kinds of technology for communication and information computerization, social communication was limited to fixed, physical, single location and face-to-face interactions. Close-knit groups in one place defined community in general terms (Jones, 1997). However, Internet created new means for communication and introduced features, such as communication across distance, quicker, multiple interactions and increased mobility. The importance of physical groups diminished,

\(^2\) www.facebook.com
nature of relationships changed and, consequently, the perception of traditional community altered with a New Media development. Theorists had to take into consideration new trends and redefine community (Wellman B. , 1997) (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998)

For Wellman: “the world is composed of networks, not groups” (Wellman B. , 1988). In Social Science, communities are also understood as loosely bounded Social networks of relationships, which are the attributes of the society in the Information Age (Wellman B. , 2001a). Networks of interpersonal ties and density of those ties are the main features of online communities, which provide sociability, support, sense of belonging, information and social identity (Wellman B. , 2001b, p. 227). While sociologist Craig Calhoun, for example, argued that content such as information, idea, feeling and desire sharing processes are the main features of online communities (Calhoun, 2002); many other researchers focused on identifying the key features necessary to form such online communities (networks) as well. According to them, purpose, polities and software are the essentials to trace any community. In other words, “the people, who come together for a particular purpose and who are guided by policies, including norms and rules, and supported by software, form communities” (Preece J. , 2000) (Preece & Krichmar, 2005).

In the book “Network Society” Darin Barney (2004) incorporated the views of many theorists and suggested a structured way of looking at social networks (Figure 2). He explained that social networks consist of the nodes (people, who are connected), ties (the ways, how they are connected) and flows (contents of the connectivity) (Barney, 2004).
As it is seen in Figure 2 above, the basic unit of the network society is an individual, who is linked by networks. Ties connect those individuals. A single tie between individuals or the elements of a unit can be called a relationship. This relationship is created when individuals generate, process and distribute information “flows” via the nodes of their networks as illustrated above.

In order to get a deeper understanding of the processes involved in this network formation, Figure 2 is explained in detail:

- Different individuals have different locations within the network and typically are aware of it. If looking at the individuals B and D, B has four connections and D has six connections. If those individuals were asked what their network consists of, they would normally know how many connections they have, also known as “Friends” in many Social Media Networks nowadays.
• All individuals are involved in different networks. If considering the individuals A and B, both have 4 connections but A’s connections are linked between each other and B’s connections are not. This is known as transitivity in logic and mathematics: a relationship structure, where if A knows X, and X knows Y, then A knows Y too.

• If to look at the individuals C and D, even though they have the same number of connections but the location they are placed in is different. D is located on the edge of the network while C is in the centre and, thus, is more likely to receive information spreading in the network faster than other individuals. This is known as centrality: a difference between two or more individuals’ proximity to the centre of a network.

To sum up, each individual occupies a particular spot in the network, which is applied to every individual differently according to the situation and goals of that individual. To put it differently, an individual is a primary element of connectivity, which behaviour leads to certain patterns of networks (Wellman B., 2002).

**Personalization** and **customization** are the outcome of the possibilities offered by such Networks, which allows a choice of individual appearance and high level of the-self formation in online environment. Wellman emphasizes that online social networks form *communities of choice* and *personal preferences*, which are enabled by the new technology (Wellman B., 2001b).

Jenny Preece and Diane M. Krichmar (2005) bring in another perspective and look at communities as well as New Media from a standpoint that there are no actual boundaries between online and offline communities. According to them, communication is not restricted to a single medium and, thus, communities migrate between the two environments, which are
offline and online. These theorists state that in the Information age, if the communication is started face-to-face, eventually, it is taken online; conversely, individuals aim to bring their online communication face-to-face. There are Social Media sites that are especially designed to bring online communication to “real life”, e.g. Tinder and other dating sites. In the Information age people communicate typically through multiple channels and, thus, it would be a rare occasion if online communities were limited only to communities online. It is a common practice that New Media involves both online and offline communities.

**A shift towards Networked Individualism.** Taking all of the above into account, especially the New Media affordances and the changes in Sociality, one of the classic ways of understanding collective human behaviour is from Methodological Individualism perspective, initially introduced by Adam Smith (Haggarty, 1976) and later discussed by many theorists in Social Science and Economics (Arrow, 1994). Adam Smith understood a group as nothing more than a sum of individuals. In other words, each individual is guided by an “invisible hand”, which leads to a kind of overall efficient market. This approach could explain human behaviour on Social Media Sites, which are typically created around an individual in a specific social structure, namely virtual community. From this standpoint, an individual does not have a complete freedom over his actions and one’s views are not completely neglected in relation to others and, therefore, represent the transition of Modern times from the focus placed on groups and communities to individuals, who are connected with each other in one or another way.

The more recent theory of Networked Individualism emerged in Social Science literature (Wellman B., 2002), which introduced the main idea of people being connected to each other in specialized relationships according to their common interests and values. Networked Individualism represents a balance between individualism and interconnectedness and is a
composition of an individual-centred culture and the need for sharing and co-experiencing, which is, in fact, one of the main elements of Social Media (Castells, 2004). In broader terms, a balance between individualization and interconnectedness represents Networked Individualism.

Individuals connecting to each other according to their common interests are seen as a common practice among networks. Homophily explains such behavioural pattern (Aiello, 2012): people tend to relate to similar others, also including the “weak” ties, such as acquaintances and friends of friends. These connections provide links to other members of Social Network Sites and, thus, expand their network. Besides, customization is a feature that builds on the views of Homophily and is also applicable on conceptualizations of Networked Individualism. Due to the possibilities provided by New Technologies, people are able to choose how they like to appear online, whom they want to connect with, etc. For instance, people have to consider privacy settings of their accounts or make deliberate choice of their “friends’” list on Social Media platforms. These are only a few examples of customization and personalization elements on New Media, which reveal a tendency of online social networks to form communities of individual choice (Wellman B., 2001b) and contribute to the shift towards Networked Individualism.

Wellman also argues that portability and the diminished role of physical space in our communication play an important role in Modernism. New Media brought an ability to be independent of locality and encouraged portability, which resulted in global connectivity and became part of globalization (Wellman B., 2001b). The scope of the network society is both global and local; the combination of the latter is called “glocal” (Wellman B., 2004), which means that organization of its components: individuals, groups, organizations, are no longer tied to particular time and place.
In the article “Physical Place and Cyber Place: The rise of personalized networking” (2001b), Wellman suggests categories for the main social affordances of online communication networks discussed above:

- Globalized connectivity (communities transcend locality and groups)
- Personalization and customization
- Role-to-Role (specialized communities)
- Person-to-Person (switching between networks)
- From inter-household networks to interpersonal networks
- Digitalization (computerization and mobilization)
- Broader bandwidth and wireless portability

Later in his article Little boxes, Globalization, and Networked Individualism (Wellman B., 2002), suggests to focus on the following two main characterizations in order to understand the nature of Networked Individualism:

- Person-to-Person: (direct but different from face-to-face) connectivity without territorial limitations;
- Role-to-Role: specialized relationships based on the individual choice and common interest.

These suggested characterizations of Networked Individualism are applied in the analysis of online Networks on Social Media context further in the paper.

Just as Barry Wellman, Sociologist Manuel Castells (2004) emphasizes the combination of inherent human need to share and co-operate as well as an individual-centred culture of Modern times, he takes a step further and argues that networks have become the basic units of Modern Society. For Castells the network society goes even further than Information Society. Castells
argues that even in Digital Age not only technology defines modern societies but also cultural, economic and political factors construct this network society. Therefore, the environment of religion, culture and politics influences the network society.

Many theories from the Social Sciences, mostly Sociology and Social Psychology, have been used to research virtual communities and networks but, currently, no coherent theory tends to dominate. It seems like researchers rather apply different theories as they seek to understand the dynamics of online communities and the implications of such trends on people and organizations in general. That being said, the thesis will focus on the newest concepts emerged in the literature of Social Science and Marketing, in particular Wellman and Castells, by the assumption that they are more relevant in Modern times. The empirical research will be based on these theories.

2.4. Mapping Social Network Sites (SNS), known as Social Media

Referring to the theory of reflexivity (Giddens, 1991), the article We’re all connected (Hannaa, Rohma, & Crittendenb, 2011) suggests that consumers and companies are co-creating each other, if we look at Social Media as part of an ecosystem involving many elements and not as a stand-alone point. Thus, with such ever-evolving online ecosystem, many different topics arise around Social Media in Social Sciences and Marketing Management; consequently, in the recent literature collected scholarships propose a comprehensive definition of Social Media. Based on a wide range of articles analysing Social Network Sites (further SNSs), Danah Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2007) present a definition of SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to:

- Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system;
- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection;
- View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within a system.”
In other words, the main characteristics of Social Media Platforms are: the ability to create, download and share contents, publish profiles, find information and connect to the other members of a particular Social Media Platform. These characteristics comply with the theories of virtual communities presented in this paper. Therefore, this definition is chosen and used for further sections in this paper.

Even though Social Media has a lot of common features in general, it cannot be generalized. There are countless social media platforms, e.g. social networking, text messaging, photo sharing, podcasting, video streaming, wikis, blogs, Internet forums and more, on the market. To make it easier to understand such a pool of Social Media the following two broad categories are identified:

- Communities of interests (e.g. Blogs, Internet forums, Niche Social Network Sites)
- Communities of people relations (e.g. Social Network Sites)

While webpages dedicated to communities of interest are still present and prosper, there is a rise of Social Network Sites, which capture the attention of both practitioners and researchers. Social Media platforms typically were focused primarily on people. The slogan of Facebook is a good example of such a framework: “You’re with friends wherever you go, whatever you do, stay close to the people who matter” (About, Facebook). Wellman describes such networks as personal and rather “egocentric” - an individual is placed at the centre of a community (Wellman B. , 1988). However, in recent years there has been a shift back to the focus on the communities of interests. 2015 seems to be the year of the niche social media platforms, which are designed in a way that allows connections, based on the same interests or specific topics, to develop. For instance, according to the official webpage of Instagram: “Instagram is the home for visual storytelling for everyone from celebrities, newsrooms and brands to teens, musicians and anyone
with a creative passion” (About us, Instagram ). Instagram and other Niche Social Networks fall under the category of communities of interest. To sum up, such SNSs categories emerged in the Modern times create a new organizational framework for online communities and a vibrant new context for Marketing practitioners and theorists (Danah M. Boyd, 2007).

2.5 Niche SNSs

While the majority of SNSs focus on its scale in connections and diversity of the activities aiming for exponential growth, other sites explicitly seek for niche audiences, which typically are narrower. For instance, Identity based SNSs like BeautifulPeople and other dating platforms aim to appear selective and elite; whereas, activity-centred sites like Couchsurfing intentionally promotes access according to geographical location. While there are many attempts to explain such division, one of the most popular explanations found in literature is Information Overload (Shenk, 1997). It brings a new perspective of communication into Digital Age that is concerned with issues of the ability to produce a lot or even too much information in some cases: quicker than ever and spread to wider audiences than ever before. However, even though nowadays more and more sites are specifically designed for niche markets and not general masses, Information Overload only indicates the richness and diverse ecology of Social Media. The latter varies in terms of its scope and functionality (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 211).

While there are some scholarly attempts to categorize Social Media and its features, ultimately the social media ecosystem itself centres on consumer experience. In other words, social networks are not about Web sites or the newest technological innovations; they are all about providing unique experiences to customers. The article We’re all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem (Hanna, Rohma, & Crittendenb, 2011) suggests that in times of modernity these experiences are created when marketers incorporate a quick and easy reach,
engagement and personalization into their company’s overall integrated marketing communications strategy through the interconnectedness of various online social media combined with traditional media (Hannaa, Rohma, & Crittendenb, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that marketing practitioners are typically active on several online platforms doing its utmost to connect with their audiences. To engage into a niche social network within company’s industry is a quite recent possibility emerged for many businesses to reach people of interest and create reflexive bond between people.

Examples of social networks that carry specific interests or target specific audience:

- Animals (Animal Social Network, My Cat Space, Dogster, UnitedCats, etc.)
- Financial (Meet Pips, Social Picks, Bizzlo, etc.)
- Parenting (Parents Connect, Minti, Got Kids Network, etc.)

Such niche online networks seem to form a new organizational structure of SNSs. Narrowed down in scope, niche SNSs seem to be less complex, thus, user-friendly. However, applicable not to all companies, if the main goal is to reach mass audiences.

2.6. Instagram

According to recent statistics, platforms that are focused on visual communication appear to be among the fastest growing SNSs worldwide (Social & Singapore, 2015). Instagram, a specially designed application for photography sharing, launched in 2010, is one of them (Appendix 5). However, there are numerous of Social Network Sites that are built around the idea of image and picture sharing, e.g. 500x photos, Flickr, DeviantArt, Picasa, are running on the market for around the same or longer time than Instagram. Even though there have been some approaches trying to explain such tremendous growth of a relatively recent Instagram application, it is still not clear what makes it so successful. The question arises if it is the photos and the possibility to
share, as the company state, that is the main attraction of the site, or there are other features, which are just as or even more important than image sharing and contribute significantly to success of the platform.

2.7. Hypothesis

While Instagram is often perceived as a platform designed purely for visual communication and Identity formation purposes, this thesis wishes to re-orient the discussion by arguing that social networks emerging on Instagram may be the main element of Instagram offering possibilities for Online Identity creation and a direct reach for fragmented audiences. The hypotheses suggest that Online Identity formation processes on Social Media have a behavioural pattern that may be applicable to the majority of companies in Modern times. The pattern explores the theories of Identity and sociality, individual and group interaction; also community, which is also known as network sociology in Modernity, developed by sociologists Castells, Wellman and Giddens, as manifested in the Identity creation processes on Instagram.

The empirical analysis are carried out in order to assess the recent concept of Networked Individualism in Social Science and investigates whether it is present on Instagram and contributes to its success among users and companies.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological foundation for the thesis: the choice of research approach, theoretical perspectives and background as well as data collection methods. The chapter concludes considerations for the ethical implications and credibility of the research. Qualitative research studies are chosen in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying issues of Identity formation within Social Media in the online network.
To get an overview of the overall research design, its perspectives and theoretical basis, methodological choices are illustrated in the figure below.

3.1. Research approach: Deductive

Deductive reasoning is chosen over induction. As Wolcott (1992) says “theory first or theory later”; hence, to begin with, more general ideas are discussed: intuitive and authoritative knowledge about Identity and relevant topics in the New Media context, i.e. theories in academic books and articles, which lay the basis for my research hypothesis. Empirical research is committed to test the hypothesis with newly collected data. Lastly, conclusions are drawn whether the findings support the theories introduced originally.
3.2. Epistemology: social constructionism

The thesis is built on a social constructionism stance, also termed as interpretative point of view, (Burr, 1995), which focuses on how meaning is created through the subject’s interaction with the world. According to this approach, meanings are dynamic because they are socially constructed via people’s interactions during their various encounters. Social constructionism is defined as theoretical perspective, which believes that a human life is shaped by social and interpersonal influences in contrast to constructivist view that only individual’s mind reflects reality. This paradigm stands for an interpretative idea that knowledge and reality is formed and reproduced by people through communication, interaction among them, their environment and practice. Social constructionism focuses on investigating social influences on both individual life and life in communities. Such perspective is applied on the theoretical conceptualizations discussed earlier because social constructionism regards individuals as an integral part of cultural, political and historical evolution and takes into consideration specific times and places (Burr, 1995).

Constructionist perspective is epistemological subjectivism, which means that a researcher is engaged in social construction as opposed to objectively depicted reality. In regards to this research, the pilot stage is constructed in a way that the observer is creating a profile on Instagram and, thus, is engaging in the social processes in order to experiment and get better insights for the further investigation. The research seeks to capture diverse understandings and perceptions of reality shared by different companies and not to focus on a singular standpoint because of the constructionist belief in multiple realities (Norum, 2008). Shared views on individual and social structures are investigated whether they emerge among different companies.
Emphatic understanding is an element of the social constructionist view, firstly introduced by the German researcher Wilhelm Dilthey (Tracy, 2013). The concept refers to participatory approach suggesting that to understand social actions it is necessary to gain emphatic insight into the other’s views. However, it is important to note that even if a list could be drawn up with similarities and key features defining social constructionism, there is no coherent definition and single social constructionist position in the academic literature (Alexandra Galbin, 2014). Nonetheless, Burr’s suggested stance (1995) is chosen as closely connected to the topics of the theses and applied for further empirical research. As a consequence, a qualitative research method is chosen to be the most relevant to this research and will be elaborated in details in section 3.4.

3.3. Theoretical perspective: Network and Discourse analysis

Choices of the Network and Discourse analysis paradigm and their relation to qualitative methodology are illustrated in the figure below and explained into details further on.

![Figure 4. Network and Discourse Analysis Paradigm. Source: own design](image)

The research is constructed of qualitative network and discourse analysis as a strategy for online community exploration on Instagram. Network analysis suits best for exploration of company involvement in networks. The relationship networks are based on investigation of a company’s
communication and participation on Social Media platform. This is the reason why the focus of the analysis is directed towards companies having an active profile on Instagram. The theoretical basis for such network analysis is based on Identity and Network theory (Castells) (Wellman B.). Chosen qualitative approach makes it possible to analyse the below listed three dimensions of the network (Scott & Carrington, 2014):

- Actors themselves, in this case companies, and their perspective on online Identity formation on Social Media context;
- Relations between companies while disclosing the patterns of relations as structures;
- Context of each network.

Network analysis discusses codes assigned to functions available on Instagram. They codes are assigned accordingly to the specific company actions on the platform. The function of the platform is investigated during the pilot stage of the research and then afterwards company’s behaviour is observed in the field research in combination to qualitative interviews as research tools to put network analysis into practice. Network analysis focuses on centrality (proximity) in the network; structure of the network, such as density of ties or intentness; or connections of the networks to other networks (Scott & Carrington, 2014). The assumption is made that such considerations will lead this research to more valid conclusions.

Because the thesis is focused not only on networks but also on Identity formation within networks, interpretative paradigm is taken into consideration as well. From discourse analysis, this perspective draws practices developed with an aim to explore the individual behaviour and its relationships, in this case relationships on Social Media. The discourse analysis is chosen because “discourses, through what is said, written or otherwise represented, serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us and different discourses construct these things in different
ways” (Burr, 1995, p. 65) The aim of the thesis is to explain Identity formation and interactions within social structures and the interdependence of the social phenomena. The theoretical basis for the discourse analysis is based on the structuration theory, in particular *duality of structure* by Giddens (1984) referring to the idea that structures exist from the bottom to the top and vice versa, as well as the belief that individuals make decisions by themselves, which are based on the structures around them. The view of discourse analysis is based on the philosophy of social constructionism and, thus, goes hand-in-hand with the thesis. Interpretive repertoires are used as discourse analytical tools. They are perceived as “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions and other kind of phenomena” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). Discourse analysis combines the analysis of Instagram use at macro (positions within a discourse) and micro levels, which ”recognise both the constitutive force of discursive practices and at the same time recognise that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices” (Davies & Harré, 1990). The data is retrieved from the observation of practices on Instagram, i.e. texts, pictures and carried out interviews.

3.4. Research Methodology: Qualitative content analysis

Both for the pilot and exploratory researches’ content analysis is chosen as a method to gain the most substantial insight into the matter of the thesis. The approach of it selected is coding. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns”. It is also explained that such method focuses on the “characteristics of language as communication, with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In other words, the meaning is created through a more complex system than simply assigning a label to specific words. It takes into account the relation of respondent to the context. Thus, this approach goes hand in hand with our social
According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed and summative. The directed approach as well as the summative one is applicable to the thesis. According to the directed approach, first of all, the theory and relevant research findings, collected in our field research stage, are used as guidance for assigning the codes. Then later on, the summate approach is applied when the codes are counted, compared and interpreted according to the underlying context.

Specific codes (open coding) are assigned to the features of the platform and its usage, which later on are divided into categories (axial coding) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes stand for labels that provide a deeper meaning. These codes allow us to retrieve and review data, modify, rearrange and visualize; if necessary, grasp the meaning; consequently, extract only the relevant information and discard irrelevant. A code system is developed in order to foster a systematic step-by-step approach. More specifically, codes and their categories are used for the interviews: companies’ profile descriptions, comments, functions of the platform used and other elements noticed through observations, which are placed into a code book. Finally, the results are defined into categories, which are used for further examination of the data.

The balance between creativity, i.e. seeing new concepts, relations as well as categories, and theoretical sensitivity, „the ability to “see” with analytical depth what is there” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), is taken into consideration.
3.5. Empirical data collection methods

Qualitative observations and interviews are chosen as main research tools to put network and discourse analysis into practice. To trace online communities on Instagram and test our hypothesis, the empirical research is structured as follows:

- **Experimental field research.** My personal profile on Instagram is recreated from scratch in order to examine the structure and features of the platform in a context of Identity formation processes and networks.

- **Exploratory research:**
  - **Observation.** The profiles of some companies on Instagram are examined through looking at (a) structure of the profile itself and how companies utilize the features offered by Instagram, (b) images and visual aspects of the platform, (c) social behavior, e.g. exchanges through public image comments, hashtags, likes, etc.
  - **Semi-structured interviews.** To support the findings from observations, businesses, which have an active Instagram profile are chosen for an in-depth qualitative research. Responded interviews are conducted among the actors that hold similar subject positions and have appropriate experiences - Social Media or Marketing managers. Interview stance is chosen to be collaborative and interactive. I as an interviewer am open to any new and unexpected findings and have no predefined expectations. All interviews are conducted in a semi-structured form on voluntary basis. This environment is chosen to stimulate openness and discussion between interviewee and interviewer rather then dictate it. Consequently, interviews without too strict constraints are allowed taking into consideration any unexpected points, consider the environment better and, thus, evoke more emergent understandings: “The more spontaneous the interview procedure, the more likely one is to obtain
spontaneous, lively and unexpected answers from the interviewees” (Kvale, 2007, p. 129).

Such research path depicts a multi-method approach for the study. A combination of different methods, observations and interviews, is believed to develop richer insights. The research is designed from the company’s perspective and not from the users (consumers) one. It carries an assumption that the intentions and ways of using the platform are different from businesses and private users. Company’s behaviour on Social Media is typically based on a thought through corporate strategies and some level of pre-acquired knowledge of its usage, while individuals tend to be more spontaneous on Social Media and their behaviour can often appear as experimental (Heinonen, 2011). Therefore, only behaviour of corporate business profiles was monitored and measured.

3.5.1. Fieldwork: Experimental field research

**Play participant.** Experiment suggests a more subjective perspective than the field research and also provides with good insights for the further exploratory stage. Therefore, the first stage of the empirical research is an experimental creation of Instagram profile, called play participant, which is also known as participant-as-observer (Tracy, 2013, p. 109). By play participant, my experimental study becomes an active member and engages in a range of activities offered by the platform, thus has a chance to research a context of the platform as well. Such membership is improvisational and has no formal norms; it allows to investigate the platform and freely reflect on the interactions on it through field note writing and; thus, detects contextual behaviours.

The research is conducted through a Free Mobile application, even though a simplified Web version exists too. That is because Instagram was primarily created for the mobile application
and not web usage. Technology is seen as a useful part of the experiment. By using such tool, I am able to create my profile on Instagram and, thus, observe the functions of it. This approach ensures that there is no bias against the other participants on the platform because I, as an observer, do not become a participant in the context: I am only going to observe certain functions. Therefore, this research is considered as more focused than other types of qualitative research.

This is considered to be a pilot stage, which helps in the initial stage to enter the context of Social Median and gain an immediate insight of the research. It is expected that the results will help shape the main study section by identifying the key focus areas for the field research and topics for the interviews.

3.5.2. Explorative research: observations and interviews

Stage 1: Participant observation

Observer is the role chosen for this stage of empirical research with an aim to involve the researcher into the context. Observations are done through exploration of chosen companies’ profiles on Instagram and recorded using field notes. The key advantage of using public Instagram data, as compared with other more traditional sources such as interviews, questionnaires or focus groups, is that it captures what is happening at the “real time” in a particular moment. Such way of data collection is non-obtrusive and so does not impose any time limits on observations.

Sampling. First of all, the field research is distinguished by choosing a sample of representative cases to be studied. Statistics show that penetration rate of Instagram among brands vary from industry to industry (Appendix 6). As of March 2014, it was found that the highest Instagram
usage is among luxury retail brands; contrary, the lowest rate is in financial services. Therefore, there is an assumption made that if a company is in an industry, where Instagram usage is already a common practise, it is easier for such a company to start off well. Travel/ leisure industry has a penetration rate of 24% within Instagram usage among brands, which is close to average, and in that matter, does not face certain advantages or disadvantages of Instagram usage imposed by the industry. Therefore, this industry is selected for the research. Such process is known as purposeful sampling in an academic Marketing literature, i.e. a sample is chosen to purposefully meet the parameters of the project’s research matter.

Moreover, the choice of such industry for the analysis can be explained by another point of view, described as follows. If the platform is focused primarily on visual communication: “Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures” (Instagram), the assumption is that industries, where services and visuals take a bigger role, focus on exploitation of the possibilities provided by Instagram. As the saying goes, a picture tells more than a thousand words, especially, in such digital environment full of noise. Therefore, no wonder that the use of visuals is a top priority for many companies, including but not limited to hospitality industry. For lodging, hotels and hostels in particular, Instagram gives an opportunity for consumers to see a sneak peak of what they are about to “see”: rooms, food, activities and other services offered by a place, which is a part of the unique selling point (USP) in such industries. Therefore, lodging, in broader terms leisure/ travel, industry is chosen for the purpose of this research. The assumption is that visual communication is, if not, will be in the future, a highly important factor for the success of such or similar business.

Geographical spread is taken into consideration in regards to the following research stage – interviews - aiming for in depth analysis. Companies located in Copenhagen and around are
chosen without a definite sample size determined in advance because the primary goal is to determine the approximate number of companies in travel/leisure industries active on Instagram. On the other hand, the scope is narrowed down to Hotels and Hostels in Copenhagen in regards to the scope of the thesis. Such sample size is considered to provide with enough of valuable information to answer the research questions. Here below is an overview of a company profile, which falls under our research framework:

- Operates in leisure/ travel industry, i.e. hotels/hostels
- Can operate worldwide but is Copenhagen based
- Has a corporate or local profile on Instagram

10 profiles within the industry were listed for the detailed analysis. 10 most recent pictures of each profile were considered to be most relevant for the research purposes. They were analysed with their meta data: number of ‘likes’, comments, specification of location, ‘tags’, ‘hashtags’ and type of filter. The properties of images were measured by applying online community and Identity formation theories from Social Science and Marketing Management. Moreover, a number of total pictures, followers/ ‘I follow’, text based descriptions, locations, videos and other elements were analysed by assigning codes and categories.

Coding. “Raw” notes, also called scratch notes (Sanjek, 1990) were taken as a starting point of the research. Such overt participant observation allowed explicit and detailed notes. The method of storage of field notes is coding, which is categorized along the process and analysed in a systematic way in order to get some results. Throughout the process the constant comparative method is applied: data is compared and fitted according to the existing codes or else a new code is created. Eventually, the systematic codebook is developed. Data is displayed in findings and lists key codes and definitions. Last but not least, the network approach is used and the overall pattern is displayed in graphs. The network approach is considerate relevant to the thesis’s
questions and useful in revealing overall patterns in the company’s behaviour that may not be evident if looking at each company individually through interviews.

The issue of the sample/selection bias is acknowledged and kept in mind throughout the entire research process, since the researcher is expected to be objective and open to any research findings.

2 stage: Semi-structured interviews

Interview planning. In order to study the processes, how online system of Instagram functions, we need to pay attention to context. In this case, context refers to the overall Social Media strategy of a company. In our study even a larger context, such as Corporate Marketing or branding strategies, is taken into consideration. Hence, semi-structured interviews are a method that provides us with valuable insights of the questions of the research and its context. Semi-structured interviews set up a framework and allow acquiring tacit knowledge. Such qualitative enquiry goes in line with discourse analysis and pays attention to context, data collection and findings (Kvale, 2007). To sum up, since Interviews incorporate such elements of qualitative research, they are chosen for the second stage of the explorative research.

Sampling. Just as in the field research, a decision in made to engage in the purposeful sampling in order to study those companies specifically. During the explorative observation, it is noticed that there are companies, which Marketing Strategies are purely focused on Social Media contrary to the ones, which are present on Social Media but not active. Therefore, both extremes are chosen for further investigation and, thus, extreme instance sampling is applied (Tracy, 2013, p. 137). With such sampling, the interviews reveal a range of attitudes towards the research questions; allow exploring the limits of existing theories and potentially develop new concepts.
The following companies are chosen for the interviews:

- **Urban House** (Instagram name *dourbanhouse*)
- **Generator Hostels** (Instagram name *generatorhostels*)
- **Brøchner Hotels Copenhagen** (Instagram name *brochnerhotels*)
- **Pub Crawl Copenhagen** (Instagram name *pubcrowlcph*)

Even though Pub Crawl Copenhagen does not fall under the category of Hotel/ Hostels, it is, yet, operating in Leisure/ travel industry. Its Instagram account is considered relevant for further investigation because of a new perspective brought up by the Pub Crawl Copenhagen Social Media Manager: “I have one (Instagram profile) but can't be bothered to use it most of the time. I don’t see the added value of most Instagram pics” (Jens Priva, Public Conversation of Facebook, November’15). A deeper look was taken into the Pub Crawl Copenhagen profile construction on Instagram. No traces of active participation on the platform were found: 0 pictures, 0 “following”. It was considered as an extreme instance and, therefore, chosen for further investigation. Interview was followed by informal private messages between the interviewee and interviewer on Facebook. From the discourse analysis standpoint, when the context is taken into consideration, the content of messages is considered valid for the purpose of research and, therefore, is included in the thesis.

From the secondary research, the differences in Marketing Communication Strategies were noticed among Urban House, Generator Hostels, Pub Crawl Copenhagen and Downtown Hostel:

- **Urban House**: Marketing Strategies focused purely on Social Media;
- **Generator Hostels**: Social Media is part of overall Marketing strategies;
- **Pub Crawl Copenhagen**: focus on Social Media as a Marketing Strategy but only on the mainstream Facebook platform. Instagram profile not developed but active;
• **Copenhagen Downtown**: Social Media is part of Marketing strategies but not systematic; has no structure.

Due to protection of the Company Privacy rights and confidentiality, no interview was conducted with Copenhagen Downtown (Instagram name *cphdowntown*). As an alternative to the interview, company’s insights into the research are shown through the private Facebook messages[^3], which are taken into consideration for the analysis[^4]; additionally, company’s profile is included for the in-depth research.

**Recruiting.** Marketing Managers are approached through e-mails or private messages on Facebook or LinkedIn and, consequently, interviews are conducted with Edith Domschy (Social Media Manager at Urban House), Ruta Cepulyte (Social Media Specialist at Generator Hostels), Jens Priva (Co-founder and Social Media Manager at Pub Crowl Copenhagen) and Jacob Jensen (Marketing Manager at Brøchner Hotels). Interviews with Edith Domschy and Jens Priva are conducted face-to-face in an informal atmosphere and recorded through a Smart Voice Recorder Application. Interview with Ruta Cepulyte is conducted online through Skype due to the geographical distance - her job is located in the headquarters in London. Interview with Jacob Jensen is carried out and recorded through a mobile phone. All interviews are transcribed afterwards.

**Interview design.** According to Kvale (2007), the more spontaneous interview procedure is, the more it brings in the unexpected and, thus, not acted and valuable answers. Based on Kvale’s

[^3]: Reference to the private messages on Facebook between the researcher and Goda Gurčinaitė, an employee at Copenhagen Downtown
recommendations, an interview guide for the respondents is designed using semi-structured questions that are open-ended and focus on the themes of Identity, online communities, networks and Social Media. This interview design aims to encourage discussions rather then dictate them. Collaborate/interactive approach is chosen and, consequently, is conducted in a way that both interviewer and interviewee are comfortable to ask each other question. Informal environment is considered to contribute to such collaborative feeling. However, in order to avoid bias, as an interviewer, I do not intervene in any of the answers provided. I focus on the structure and relevance of the questions to gain richer answers from the interviewees.

The interview is started with an introduction to the process of the interview and customized questions are presented. During the interview questions arise and are addressed, which only support the discourse analysis mentioned earlier. When new and interesting points of view emerge, additional questions are raised in order to examine views of the respondents even more into detail.

3.6. Qualitative quality: credibility and ethics

**Credibility.** The thesis aims for objectivity, which means that no individual point of view or any bias of the researcher is presented. To ensure objectivity, objective scientific procedures are incorporated in the development of the data and systematic evaluation of it. The reliability is achieved through consistency and triangulation of the research methods used, concrete information and details provided and coherent information recordings. The assumptions are based on logical considerations and data collected.

**Ethics.** The research took into consideration ethical issues, such as maintaining confidentiality, securing permissions, e.g. the right to record interviews. No illegal or ethically wrongful behaviour took part during the study.
4. Findings

In this section the results of the study are presented. The findings are explained and illustrated by tables and graphs. Appendix 11 gives a brief visual illustration of how the companies present themselves on Instagram. The main elements in the findings are Identity formation processes in Social Media context and online communities.

Further, three architectural aspects of Instagram are discussed. They are the ones influencing the Identity formation process and are seen as the attributes of the concept of Networked Individualism (Castells, 2004):

- *Self-presentation is predominately overt rather than covert;*
- *Structure of Instagram allows connections through various processes;*
- *Functions are simplified and easy to use.*

From the experimental pilot stage, it is seen that the platform is designed in a way that all information of its members is displayed publicly, unless, after the profile is created, a member claims for the changes of its privacy settings. It seems that platform encourages information to be shown to others, thus, promotes openness and creates new opportunities for the Brand exposure. Such viewpoint is subjected to have an effect on online Brand Identity formation processes.

Moreover, the platform offers many ways for the information to be shared: post, repost, adding locations and *hashtags.* The members can follow each other and, in that way, keep being updated with information that the other members in the network are posting. As a result, various online networks evolve. In addition, depending on content that a member posts or its actions, such as

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5 Absalon, AnnexCopenhagen, Brøchner Hotels, Copenhagen Downtown, Danhostel Copenhagen City, First Hotel Twentyseven, Generator Hostels, Sleep in Heaven, Urban House and Woodah Hostel
sorts of images he likes, suggestions for the possible new connections are provided by the platform: “Discover people”, “Explore people”, “Based on Instagram popular searches”, “Based on photos you liked”. The latter is known as a targeted marketing concept in Marketing Management literature and customization, which is an attribute of the Networked Individualism (Castells) concept in Social Sciences. It proves that generally nowadays the focus in terms of Identity formation is shifted away from self-centeredness towards exploration of outer spaces and improved connectivity (Therborn & Immerfall, 2010).

Contrary to the market leader Facebook\(^6\), which offers multiple options for communication, information exchange and other multiple experiences, such as online games, Instagram is focusing on simplicity in functions by offering options for mainly visual communication and easy access, in particular, mobilization: designing fast and reliable application (Instagram, About us, 2015). In relation to such limited functionality, it seems that Instagram creators make great suggestions to overcome Information Overload (Shenk, 1997) in this Digital Age and help to reach niche audiences, which eventually result in taking part of fragmented communication seen among online communities (Wynn & Katz, 1997).

**Content Analysis.** In this section the codebook framework is presented and developed for the analysis. Key measures are derived from the theoretical background and explorative research. Since Social Media is seen as a quite unique concept bringing together both qualitative and quantitative types of insight to measure performance and value obtained from Social Media efforts, which is the mix of both measures (qualitative measures, like texted-based messages and comments; quantitative, like numbers and statistics), the codebook is presented as following.

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\(^6\) www.facebook.com
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Connectivity</strong></td>
<td>Achieve critical mass</td>
<td>Number of followers, likes, comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Therborn &amp; Immerfall)</td>
<td>Multiple channels (Giddens) (Turkle), transitivity</td>
<td>Variety of <em>hashtags</em>, links to other media channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage on-going interaction</td>
<td>Consistency in actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Person-to-Person (Wellman B.)</td>
<td>Direct messages, comments, <em>likes</em>, tagging, following a member, not groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role-to-Role (Wellman B.)</td>
<td>Communication according to topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Globality</strong></td>
<td>Distant connections (Wellman B.)</td>
<td>“Discover people”, “Follow”, <em>like</em> anything anywhere in the world, use a location as element of global world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Giddens)</td>
<td>Space of flows (Castells)</td>
<td>Communities transcend locality and the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Space of imagination limitless (Therborn)</td>
<td>No requirements of physical locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global/local (Castells) (Giddens)</td>
<td>Unique images, free personal choices over content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Persuade engagement with brand</td>
<td>Offers, campaigns, contests, <em>hashtags</em> outside the platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Castells)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Re-post/re-share/re-gram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Involve in conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Personalization,</strong></td>
<td>Persuade uniqueness</td>
<td>Unique pictures, hashtags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>customization</strong></td>
<td>“Opinion leaders” and “followers” (Flynn, Goldsmith, &amp; Eastman)</td>
<td>Platform “knows” your preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Wellman B.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reach target, niche markets, influential personalities, bloggers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Homophily</em> (Aiello, 2012)</td>
<td>Members shaping their own likes, tastes, interests, politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Reflexivity</strong></td>
<td>Towards higher level of social reflexivity</td>
<td>Re-post/re-share/re-gram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Giddens)</td>
<td>Cooperation (Castells), information exchange (Calhoun)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Personal freedom</strong></td>
<td>Branding</td>
<td>Visual communication of Brand values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Giddens)</td>
<td>Variation</td>
<td>Post organic or copied pictures from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-actualization (Maslow)</td>
<td>Creativity, idea realization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Timeless</strong></td>
<td>No time limitations</td>
<td>No option to indicate time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Instagram codebook. Source: own design
4.1. Connectivity

Connectivity, an element widely mentioned in the conceptualizations of online communities (Therborn & Immerfall, 2010), gained significant attention in this thesis. In the empirical research connectivity was described as one of the most essential elements of Instagram. In relation to that, below it is shown how the researched companies try to use this element of connectivity with their audiences in practise: “One of the main things (...) is getting more followers, of course, and getting more engagement. Secondary, is a number of likes on each post” (Edith Domschy, Appendix 7). “(...) When people put up a picture from one of our hotels or they (customers and users of Instagram) ask something, so we try to get in and be part of the conversation and part of the community that is around our hotels”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8).

To answer what the aim is for Generator Hostels to be on Instagram, Ruta Cepulyte mentions connectivity as the first thing: “Well, the aim is community growth as well as establishing relationships with customers” (Appendix 10).

The measurement of connectivity is a number of followers, likes and comments. Besides, another widely used element of Instagram that promotes connectivity is hashtags - specific labels attached to a picture, according it images are categorized and displayed for the others. Hashtags seem to be a tool to connect through multiple channels (Turkle): “’cause you know, when you use the right hashtags, then people, who do not necessary follow you on Instagram, would find you and maybe check your profile and get interested, and then start following you”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

Hashtags are found as a common feature in all the profiles. However, the number of them used differs quite significantly. According to observations, all the observed companies are adding in
average 6 hashtags per picture, except for Brøchner Hotels, which are adding 18 hashtags on average per picture (Appendix 12). While Brøchner Hotels use hashtags in order to expose the Brand as much as possible, Generator Hostels present a different perspective on the amount of hashtags: (...) they (brands) would use a lot of hashtags to attract new followers and probably lots of people leverage that into a higher traffic, but right now, nowadays, it looks a bit desperate if you use too many hashtags. So, we try to maybe put one hashtag or two, depending what we want to say on the picture content itself. (...) There is this thin “dance” between being too desperate and being cool and chill”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

Nevertheless, companies agree that hashtags make it easier for Instagram users to find images with a specific theme and, therefore, companies use them in order not only to reach target groups but also be discovered by people in different networks: “Why I (Urban House) use hashtags is because you can be tracked by hashtags”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7); “And that (hashtags) is a way to connect with more influential people in that area. So it is a very good way to connect. If you compare that to Facebook, it is very hard to take direct contact, to let’s say interior designers or interior shops or decorations”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8). It is important to note, that prior to hashtags, the only way to see what someone was posting was if you were a friend or follower. Now the addition of hashtags helps to create a more connected online environment.

Even though some companies, such as Generator Hostels, are aiming only for 2 hashtags per post, they highlight the importance of it: “It is important that you use #hashtag for your photo. #hashtags make it easy for you to collect photos from your followers around a certain theme and used to grow your following”; adding tags to your photos and videos is a great way to find new followers and share your posts with more people” (Appendix 10).
Besides, *Hashtags* are perceived as part of Brand Identity as well. If hashtags are the labels or categories that the Brand can decide upon and, thus, attach them to Brand, it is important to consider the kind of categories the company like to be found under, when someone searched for it on Social Media. From our research, in the service/tourism industry the most popular *hashtags* fall under the two categories:

- Traveling (#copenhagen, #travel, #hotel) - *hashtags* relevant to the industry in research;
- Custom (#cocopenhagen, #genlove, #woodah) - unique *hashtags*, which have not existed before a company created them (Appendix 14).

The internal Instagram Guidelines of Generator Hostels explain the choice of *hashtags* as: “*The #hashtag is used to organise photos and needs to be both on trend but also something that is unique just for your event*” (Appendix 10). The company also encourages creativity in getting more inventive with *hashtags*, e.g. #GenDecor and be more specific, e.g. #genlovesfoodporn” (Appendix 10). “*It should be something catchy and then people would use it and if people spread it through their social media channels, so most likely it is going to be a viral exchange, cross-linking marketing that brings new following as well*”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

To sum up, through *hashtags* companies not only connect with the similar, like-minded members (Wellman B., 2001) but also gain bigger Brand Exposure and visibility on multiple channels and have an opportunity to share images with the much broader group of people than just company’s followers (Therborn & Immerfall). It seems that *hashtags* help to achieve the centrality of connectivity, which leads to getting more response towards the Brand. For instance, First Hotel Twentyseven adds only two custom *hashtags* (#FirstHotelTwentyseven #FirstHotels) and, consequently, gets on average two *likes* per picture; to compare, Brøchner Hotels, which by adding 18 various general *hashtags* (#travel, #design, #hotels, etc.), becomes connected with
more ties and, therefore, gets 22 *likes* on the posted picture. On the other hand, hashtags are not the only way to reach a centrality of connectivity. Paid Ads would be another example, which the most recent feature of Instagram introduced to reach the right audiences. Paid Ads are “(...) a great way to reach a lot of people. So, for instance, since we had this ad we reached fifty thousand times (...) that the ad had been seen. (...) it’s a great way to reach out to so many people, our target marker is over there and you can target it....”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7).

Hence, through the right *hashtag* systems and other elements like Paid Ads, Brands can successfully involve in trending or niche topics and build fragmented but central and transitive connections (Wynn & Katz). Moreover, the centrality of connectivity is typically improved through multiple channels, that is, by including other Social Media Sites. Therefore, as a common practice companies add their Homepage or Facebook address to the description of the company on Instagram (Appendix 11). According to Jens Priva (Appendix 9), one of the main reasons for Pub Crawl Copenhagen to have a profile on Instagram is because “it is just another opportunity to direct people to the website”. In Marketing Literature, it is known as a Cross-Marketing concept.

Another attribute of a more central connectivity is to ensure ongoing interactions. Interviewees named that ideally they would like to post one picture a day but it is very often too time consuming (Appendix 7, 8). Generator Hostels take one step further and give an even more structured way to keep the flow in posting pictures, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10):

- **Food & Beverage: 1-2 images per week**
- **Interior design: 1-2 images per week**
- **Events: 1-2 images per week**
- **Music & Technology: 1 image per week**
- **5 Wanderlust: 1 Image per week**
In terms of the relation of connectivity through comments, from the observations it is noticed that one image averagely gets two comments: one from a user and another as a reply from the company (Appendix 11). Thus, commenting is a direct Person-to-Person communication and, typically, it is a two-way systematic and constant interaction.

What is more, Instagram just recently launched an Instagram Direct feature (Instagram Direct, Instagram), which encourages Person-to-Person communication among users even stronger. However, it is such a new feature that not many Brands know about it: “No, you can not send messages on Instagram”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10). Tagging is another function offered by Instagram for a better Person-to-Person communication. Yet, it is also not seen as leveraged feature among the Brands. Only Urban House mentioned it as a possibility: “we try to tag people, if we have them in the pictures”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7). On the contrary, specialized Role-to-Role communication among members, who are interested in the same topics, is a common practice by all the Brands: “(...) you look for what other have posted under that hashtag, that’s how you get discovered by new people, for instance, under the same topic, so it’s relevant for them”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7); “We do follow, especially people (...) we can be recognized with”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8); “We as any good account would follow the right influencers to borrow the content and re-gram it”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

4.2. Globality

The platform allows connections through distance using functions, such as “Discover people” or “Follow”, which provide with a list of members located anywhere in the world. Besides, once members connect with one another, the platform does not provide any update on the location from which anything is posted, whereas e.g. Foursquare does, unless a member indicates the location itself. So, the actions on the platform do not face any geographical limitations.
**Global/ local.** Generator Hostels are the only company from our sample, which has one international profile, instead of many local ones, and has the highest number of followers among the ten chosen companies. In the beginning, the company used local profiles, which later were merged into one and, thus, the company became more consistent: “if everyone is doing different content and using different tone of voice and different types of images, then the brand is not very consistent. Therefore, it is more about having a central account and (...) having the control of what it is and how you want to communicate to your audience” (Appendix 10). The Brand positions itself in a centre of communication and considers local audiences as one global audience and, thus, achieves centrality as it is described in the theories of online networks in Marketing literature. Besides, according to them, now the company does not need to use a lot of hashtags in order to reach global audiences, which, however, was not a case in the beginning, when the profile was created. Their perspective in communication through Instagram could be describes as glocal, meaning that the Brand’s global profile is now relying on the local networks the Brand has already established.

On the other hand, the indication of a location seems to be a powerful tool to connect with the global audiences as well. All the companies observed tagged at least once a location (Appendix 14). Some companies like Danhostel not only tags the location, where a picture is taken, but also adds hashtags describing the location around them (Appendix 14). Besides, Jacob Jensen from Brøchner Hotels comments: “We try to make it like it is our Copenhagen (...). That is basically most of the pictures that we post (...), pictures that have something to do with local environment around our hotel” (Appendix 8). Moreover, he elaborates even further: “Also, if we know (...) interesting people in Copenhagen, they would be the ones to connect. When people from other countries want to know where to go and what to do in Copenhagen, they would ask them. (...
So, getting to know locals can have a very big impact on attracting international crowds” (Appendix 8). It is an indication of the strong impact of global interconnectivity on the Brand.

However, Globality does not necessarily stand as a geographical indicator. Global can be relating to the whole of something that has no limits. In other words, according to Therborn (2000), our mind is the space that is limitless. From this perspective, Instagram is focusing on space of imagination. For instance, there are limitless opportunities for image creation: a wide range of filters, quality, different levels of artistic expression and more. Just to name a few, CPH Downtown applauds blurred pictures in contrast to the images of First Hotel Twentyseven, which are only high quality professionally made pictures (Appendix 11). However, from the interviews it seems like the Brands in research do not have a clear systematic guidance for the pictures itself. As the Social Media Specialist from Generator Hostels indicates: “We don’t have any guidelines. It is more like internal feeling, what is the right quality but I don’t think that it is something we have; but it is all about high quality pictures”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10). Social Media Manager from Urban House sounds uncertain about it as well: “Yeah, well, I’m doing the guidelines, so it’s really up to me but of course I have something in my mind…”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7). Besides, the platform itself does not encourage audit of pictures, unless it is obscene content (Terms of Use, Instagram).

4.3. Engagement

As Instagram states: “Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever”. However, the process of sharing a picture does not end with an added filter to it. During the explorative stage it was revealed that none of the companies confine themselves to only posting pictures. Companies try to empower more functions available on Instagram like adding a texted-based description of an image, hashtags,
tags of people, locations, etc. By combining such features, companies are able to communicate through B2C, C2B and even C2C channels.

While engaging in the conversations and asking questions, companies create a voice to its customers, also known as user-generated content in Marketing Management literature and, thus, co-create their brand. Throughout the empirical research, there was discovered a diversity of ways that Brands engage with customers and present findings, which are:

- **Through interesting and relevant pictures involve customers not only online.** “I try to make it about us (Urban House) in a way that is interesting for a guest like it could be like “Oh, they’re so cool, I wanna stay there!” and (...) that’s what I have in mind many times when I post a picture”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7).

Danhostel utilizes direct advertising through the images in order to involve more customers and, thus, up-sale their services (Appendix 11). Generally, a trend among the observed companies is to share more artistic and informal pictures in order to meet such a way of engagement of the Brand.

- **Create campaigns and contests.** Brands invite customers to involve by asking them to post a specific picture or visit, for instance, company’s website in order to win a prize: “For instance, now we (Urban House) have a New Year’s Eve campaign where we are giving away fifty beds on New Year’s Eve for free and one of the channels where we communicate about this is on Instagram”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7).

- **Promote hashtags outside the platform.** Both Generator Hostels and Urban House generates engagement by creating a “live wall”: when someone uses #docopenhagen or #genlove, the picture appears on a screen at the bars of the hostels displaying live feed of
Instagram (Appendix 7, 10). Other ways of engagement encouragement are through hashtags were mentioned as well: “(...) within the menus we have #genfoodie” (Generator Hostels) and #docopenhagen in any kind of Marketing material at Urban House.

- **Re-post images of the other users.** It is one of the most common practices on Instagram not only among private users but also companies:
  
  o Brøncher Hotels incorporate such element into their strategies: “We also try to repost pictures that we think are part of our identity”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8).
  
  o Absalon Hotel and Annex Copenhagen applaud a variety of images, not necessarily made by them (Appendix 11).
  
  o Urban House includes the pictures made by their customers even to their Marketing material other than only on Instagram: “Last time I used it (direct messaging) a lot because I wanted to get some user generated content and I, the first of all, needed to ask for people’s permission and I wanted to use their pictures in the campaign (...) - it creates like an extra engagement”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7).

- **Involve in conversations and ask questions.** Get people talking (C2C communication) and exchanging ideas about a particular topic is a good way to drive engagement instantly. As Generator Hostels state: “The best posts are oriented questions or shared experiences. E.g. Hmmm what to do on a Tuesday night? Ladies night @GeneratorHostel- GET IN!” (Appendix 10). Another example by Woodah Hostels, which only raises a question for the customers: “Did you know? #hostellife #bookingfeesucks #supportyourlocalhostel”

- **Listen to conversations and respond.** A new “reverse” perspective from above is brought by Jacob Jensen, who talks about the importance of following the conversations
among your customers and then responding to them: “We focus more on interacting with the people, who put up pictures themselves (...) So for example, when bloggers take a picture from our hotel and they recommend that hotel to some of their friends, their friends will comment on their photo and we would go and say, we would love to see you here. So we want to be part of THEIR pictures and THEIR conversations”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8).

To sum up, the discussion of the elements of connectivity, globality and engagement leads to an assumption that the higher the level of connectivity, globality and engagement, the higher the response rate among customers is. One way to measure response rate is to look at the correlation between the number of followers and pictures posted. In other words, how many followers a Brand gets, when it posts a picture. For instance, Generator Hostels have a rate of 10, which means that for 1 applauded picture the Brand receives in average 10 followers (Appendix 12); Brøchner Hotels, which have a rate of 7 followers per 1 picture. To compare, First Hotel Twentyseven and Annexcopenhagen have a rate of 1 follower per 1 picture. Therefore, Generator Hostels take place in the Node C (see Figure 2), which is positioned centrally in the network and, therefore, has a highest level of transitivity and density of ties. Such measurement reveals an enhanced brand-consumer relationship.

4.4. Personalization and Customization

Instagram incorporates Targeted Marketing whereby images are placed to reach users based on their behavioural patterns on the “based on photos you liked” feature on Instagram. Besides, Instagram encourages uniqueness through pictures as it is often suggested in Marketing Management literature to use visuals for an extra added value to the message. When it comes to Instagram, it seems that companies use it to create their profiles to appear as companies with
personalities, known as Brand Identity as a person approach by David Aaker in the academic literature.

At Urban House the focus is on informal urban image that the Brand builds on: “It’s definitely informal, never formal, because that’s part of our brand”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7). Generator Hostels such an approach as well: “so you want to associate yourself with influencers and then by borrowing their brand image, so you at the same time communicate, what you stand for. So people have like an image, a personality in front of your brand and they can connect”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

However, contrary to the diversity of informal pictures on the Urban House and other profiles under investigation, First Hotel Twentyseven is uploading only professional photos, yet vibrant in colours and visually appealing to the eye (Appendix 11). As Jacob Jensen from Brøchner explains, the most important thing for the Brand is to: “(...) be visible, when people search for Copenhagen or boutiques or hotels, that they can have a visual and honest picture of who we are” (Appendix 8). Such personalized visibility creates unique hashtags like #woodahcafe by Woodah Hostel, #itsmorefun by Sleep in Heaven or #FirstHotels by First Hotel Twentyseven, which describe the Brand Identity and is always chosen over generic hashtags such as #life (Appendix 14).

Customization. Each profile on Instagram looks differently due to customization. Appendix 10 illustrates a structure of the profiles or framework, which is customized according to the individual taste, goals, etc. Normally, a profile is built according to some specific topics that are relevant to the account holder, e.g. interior design, healthy lifestyle, etc. Then the connections are typically built according to those topics, so the designers would search for other profiles, which contain content related to design, otherwise known as Homophily (Aiello, 2012) in the
academic literature. For instance, the investigated hotels are typically following (Appendix 11) interior designers, travel photographers, back packers, food bloggers, etc.: “It (Instagram) is more specific. For example, interior decoration interested people are very active on Instagram. And that is a way to connect with more influential people in that area. So, it is a very good way to connect. If you compare that to Facebook, it is very hard to take direct contact to let’s say interior designers or interior shops or decorations. (...) For example, typically top bloggers or top Instagramers, we call them “ikers”, they know each other, so they do meetings around the world, so if one “iker” is interested in doing something with us, they might encourage and invite their friends as well. So, it is a very powerful way to discover opinion”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8). Jensen refers to transitive relation that Brands seek to achieve: when a relation exists between a first and a second member, and between the second member and a third, the relations also exist between the first and the third members. Hence, customization of profiles leads to transitivity, when Brands achieve even higher lever of connectivity.

4.5. Reflexivity

It seems that companies reflect on trends of Digitalization and, thus, bring their Brand Identity formation and Marketing Communication strategies online. Due to many individuals that have built their profiles in various online environments, many Brands appear to be creating their online profiles as well but only after they have involved in the learning processes about the consequences such online profiles bring to the Brand Equity and overall company performance. Just as Jakob Jensen states: “So, the beginning, it was about just being there (on Instagram) and now we are more and more focusing on using it actively” (Appendix 8). There are many reasons for such phenomenon but one of the reasons for bringing Brand online is provided by Jens Priva, who explains that Pub Crawl Copenhagen has a profile on Instagram (even though it has never been utilized actively) because it is “for the name reservation, as in nobody else would take the
name”, Jens Priva (Appendix 9). In other words, Brands feel the need to “ensure a spot” for themselves on such platforms. This kind of phenomenon is considered an element of reflexivity and, in particular, an effect of Social Structures in the literature of Social Sciences.

A high level of Social Reflexivity is found during the observations and interviews. First of all, it is important to note that hotel interiors and events as well as food and beverages are the main categories in terms of the images applauded by the companies under investigation (Appendix 11). So, even in a lodging industry, companies do not focus on simply portraying their services, e.g. the looks of their rooms. Instead, their profiles reflect their own characteristics and beliefs, what company stands for as well as the current trends on the market. To summarize, they create their own narratives through pictures continuously reflecting the environment and, eventually, creating their story and online Brand Identity (Giddens, 1991). Companies build their profiles while focusing on their Brand values rather than relying on the social structures around: “So as I already mentioned, we want to show our brand portfolio, showing different properties”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10); “(...) we’re trying to post about things that are happening in the house (...) so maybe if we have a live concert so I will post the music, usually a video about that and Salsa nights I’ll post about the dancers. If you look at our Instagram account you don’t see many pictures of beds or like the rooms and so on because that’s not our focus, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7); “Pictures that either have something to do with our hotels, with our signatures such as pictures of our breakfast or wine hour and pictures that have something to do with local environment around our hotel”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8).

Now Brands want to cooperate with the users and involve User Generated content into their communication strategies. So, the content posted by those users and companies would reflect each other, e.g. “We also have wanderlust content that we follow Instagram accounts that are
known for the travel content and then we use it for re-gramming content to inspire people to travel”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10); “we also try to repost pictures that we think are part of our identity”, Jacob Jensen (Appendix 8); “(...) it’s best to ask (if you can use a picture,) especially if that also creates like an extra engagement, people will be so surprised like “Oh my God, you wanna use my picture! Thank you so much!”; (...) I used them (direct messages) to ask for their permission to post the picture”, Edith Domschy (Appendix 7). Re-sharing, re-posting, re-gramming are the features that eventually stand for the information exchange among users and are one of the most leveraged features by the Brands on Instagram.

4.6. Personal Freedom

In Modern times the increased level of self-expression is felt in many realms of life, including Social Media. Instagram, for instance, promotes any kind of creativity as long as everyone is respected and has no clear rules for limitations of its content (Community Guidelines, Instagram). Additionally, from a pilot stage of the research it is noted that Instagram offers an individual a choice to build a profile publicly or privately. Members have lot of possibilities in regards to their privacy settings: share photos openly with everyone or only with specific Instagram followers, block random followers, wipe photos off the Instagram’s photo map, delete images from a photo feed, etc. So, only by looking at the structure of the platform it is clear that it is up to the individual’s choice, how the account is structured.

According to the data collected during the interviews, the main focus of companies is on their Branding strategies: how to communicate their Brand values, how to make it more visible and more connected rather than exploring social structures around on the platform: “One thing is to understand what sort of following you have right now and the other thing is to sort of understand where you want to place yourself in the future. Because it is all about pushing demographics
through another level, how you want to be perceived. (...) trying to sort of position brand using brand as a person approach, sort of trying to communicate the brand values and what Generator stands for”, Ruta Cepulyte (Appendix 10).

When it comes to the visual aspect of images, the thesis does not attempt to analyze any visual content of images in details. However, evidence shows that the platform “is all about inspiring content” (Ruta Cepulyte) that could be communicated through a variety of approaches. From observations (Appendix 11), categories to classify pictures are suggested bellow:

- Informational: products, services, e.g. interior designs;
- Personal: people oriented, e.g. happy faces, famous people;
- Simple: informal, normally depicting “behind the scenes”;
- Sophisticated/ artsy: anything that looks appealing to the eye;
- Inspirational: texted based inspirational quotes, glamorous places;
- Complex: systematic campaigns, ads.

4.7. Timeless

When an image is uploaded on Instagram, it instantly appears on the news feed, which is constantly updating posts from the people you follow. While users can add a description and location, they do not have an option to indicate the time, which is allowed on the other social media platforms, such as Facebook. In this way Instagram enables us to stay in touch with the other members regardless of time. According to exploration of the profiles and interviews, it seems that none of the companies pay too much attention to the time frame. As Jacob Jensen Brøchner Hotel elaborates: “We don’t have the special time but we try to do the pictures, so that they reflect on the time that we post. So, for example, in the evening we will post a wine picture and in the morning we will post a coffee picture. So, we try to do it in the right time of context”
By the right time of the context, Jacob Jensen refers to the real time regardless of personal, work-related, leisure or other time frames.

4.8. Paradigm model

Pulling these considerations together, these codes described earlier fall under the four main categories:

- **Self-expression**: to be able to freely express yourself and make choices;
- **Sharing**: to be able to share your thoughts, opinions, personal information, etc.;
- **Connectivity**: to find and connect with the others similar to us;
- **Digitalization**: mobilization, technological innovations

In relation to that, a paradigm model based on the codes, which reflect concepts and data collected, is developed.

Due to a shift in Modernity to prioritize individualism and enhanced freedom instead of dependence of social structures, Brands and individuals began focusing on trying to figure out
who they really were, what their values, dreams, likes and desires are. Higher values, such as self-realization and self-expression, suddenly, appeared at the forefront of the human needs. Therefore, individuals have a need to express themselves and form their personality. On another hand, due to “the love of the same”, which is a term known for decades, the more freedom humans have, the more they tend to copy each other. As a result, individuals and Brands turn to seek for connections with like-minded people with whom they would be able to share those concerns and discuss other relevant topics. It seems that, in the Information Age, digital devices and technological innovations like social media are leveraged as a method to connect for such purposes. Respectively, connections are being formed and transformed on various online platforms. Such combinations of actions lead to a phenomenon when online communities, also known as virtual social networks, emerge. Even though the consequences of such phenomenon on Bran Equity are still not clear, it seems that now Brands tend to focus on Personality Based Brand Identity in Social Media context.

4.9. Other context observations

Here are some general comments that do not fall under the code categories but are valuable in the context of the research.

According to Jens Priva from Pub Crawl Copenhagen, Instagram is a platform that does not create any value for his company. However, the results of the interview conclude that he lacked knowledge in the functionalities available on Instagram and, therefore, focused only on considerations of communication through pictures (Appendix 9). In terms of a broader context, during the interview Pub Crawl Copenhagen became familiar with possibilities for the Brand on Instagram and, as a result, applauded its first picture with a text based description inviting to follow the company. It also included a specific hashtag #docopenhagen, which displayed this
picture on the live wall at Urban House (Appendix 13). This observation implies that positive effects of Instagram usage on Brand Equity come with the more complex processes than only digital picture sharing.

5. Discussion and implications

The aim of this study is to lower the gap between academic theorists and Marketing practitioners’ interests in online communities in the very recently emerged Networked Individualism context. Due to lack of consensus in conceptualizations and support of empirical evidence in the academic literature, the nature of the Identity formation processes in Social Media context and its relation to online communities has remained unclear and its perceived benefits on Brand Equity are still uncertain. This thesis contributes to a field of online communities by presenting a theoretical study of the changes in Identity formation processes in relation to online communities and the Social Media context; also, confirming it through the empirical analysis of the online Brand behavior on Instagram. Hence, the findings of the study summarize the evidence of Brand interactions in online communities on a particular context, which in this case is Instagram; what overall outcomes are to be anticipated and implications brought on Brand Equity for both marketing theory and practice.

5.1. Theoretical implications in Marketing

The potential outcomes mentioned in the academic literature mostly suggest that online communities that emerge in Networked Individualism Society (Castells, 1996) affect the nature of the Brand Identity formation processes in Social Media Context and provide a value proposition to the customers, in particular self-expressive and emotional benefits. The findings of the empirical study confirm such considerations and demonstrate that both self-expressive and emotional benefits lead to stronger brand-consumer relationships. The self-expressive benefit is
described to occur when brands become symbols of a person’s self-concept and, consequently, create means for an individual to communicate and share its self-image, values, dreams and other personality traits with that brand. In other words, the study demonstrates that brands through various ways of communication, such as hashtags, image campaigns and other functions of Instagram, create a voice to its customers (4.3). In that way, the interaction with a brand becomes a way to fulfil the need of self-expression and personalized communication, which is especially important in Modernity. So, an individual as a brand user expresses itself and shows its personal image and overall personality by involving in public actions with the brand: following, liking, tagging, hashtagging, etc (4.1, 4.3), and thus, creates a user generated content to the Brand. The empirical study shows that with such interactions different levels of engagement emerge, for instance, a number of likes received per one image shared by the brand determines high or low engagement. Nevertheless, the study reveals that personalization, connections and engagement among the other features of Networked Individualism contribute to the highest value proposition for the customer and, thus, are heightened in the Social Media context and Brand Identity formation processes by both theorists and practitioners.

The analysis also shows that there is a close relationship between the main characteristics of the emotional and self-expressive benefits that are created for the customer. For example, there is a subtle difference between feeling the same like a brand does and in response showing support by liking or following that brand; involving in such actions because of the same values as the brand stands for. In fact, the analysis shows that Brands focus more on self-expressive than emotional benefits (4.6), e.g. sharing aspiring content rather than memories from the past or permanent content linked to an individual’s personality rather than occasional content. It is believed that self-expressive benefits secure a more permanent brand-customer relationship.
The available literature on the Brand Identity in Social Media context in Marketing Management and Social Science mainly refers to online communities, which consists of seven main dimensions: connections, global/local, engagement, personalization/customization, reflexivity, personal freedom and the notion of timeless time (Castells) (Wellman B.) (Giddens). The results of the study comply with such beliefs of Social Scientists and add to them that such dimensions should be organized around a Brand-as-Person perspective in order to build a long lasting and strong brand-consumer relationship and, ultimately, strengthen Brand Equity. The empirical study suggests that nowadays in Social Media context a strong brand-consumer relationship emerge when the brand is considered as a person. In Marketing literature this is known as Brand personality, which is created by borrowing different human personality dimensions and traits (Aaker, 1996). For example, the personal associations such as concerns of healthy lifestyle or caring for adventure translate into liking and following the brand that forms the basis for such relationship. In other words, a brand aims to express its personality in a way that consumers could relate to and use for their own formation and expression of themselves. The construction of the suggested Brand-as-Person approach is illustrated in the figure and discussed below.

![Figure 4 Brand personality relation. Source: Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre, 2009, p.119](image)

Taking all of the above into consideration, the thesis suggests the Brand as Person approach (Aaker, 1996) for the effective Brand Identity formation processes in online Social Media context. This approach allows the members of the platform reflect themselves on the brand
(consumer self expression) and refers to reflective relationships discussed by Giddens (1991) in the literature of Social Sciences. The empirical results of the study (4.3) get along with the Giddens ideas of reflexivity and add to them that in order to ensure circular brand-consumer relationships a brand personality should be created and defined as the set of human characteristics (Human Personality). As revealed in the interviews as well as in the explorative research, on Social Media platforms, consumers often interact with Brands as if they were people. For instance, brands, which during the interviews described themselves as inspiring, cool, laid back, urban and as other human personality traits, reached the highest consumer response rate towards their actions on Instagram (Appendix 12). Hence, the research findings suggest that Brand’s Identity is based on personality can look more interesting, diverse and richer than the ones based on product attributes and, therefore, foster greater reactions. Such perspective goes well in line with the aim of Instagram to promote creativity and be a platform “for anyone with a creative passion” (About us, Instagram ). In conclusion, according to the results of the empirical research and discussions of the academic theories, Brand as Person perspective (Aaker, 1996) is suggested for Marketing Managers as an approach to clarify, enrich, differentiate and build their Brand Identity in the new Social Media context. The overall implication is that brand-consumer relationships emerge when the Personality based approach is chosen in such context, which ultimately contributes to stronger Brand Equity, in particular Brand awareness, Brand associations and Brand loyalty.

While practitioners are involved in various Marketing activities in an attempt to maximize their brand equity and fully leverage its value, the above-discussed findings help to define the potential benefits of emerging online communities on Brand Equity. First of all, the sources of academic literature mainly refer to an online community growth related constraints, which potentially result in the increased Brand name awareness (Wellman B., 2001) (Castells, 2004).
Due to the constant and active Brand presence on Social Media and continuous contact with the customers, *Brand recall and recognition* as the elements of Brand awareness can be achieved among the customers of the network. The study demonstrated that a level of *Brand recall and recognition* depends on the frequency and structure of connectivity among Brands and individual users of Instagram (4.1). The results from the empirical study put forward the touch points of connectivity for consideration: centrality, transitivity and density of connections to increase the level of *Brand recall and recognition* (4.3). Such touch points suggest that the more central connections are, the higher *Brand recall and recognition* is reached. In other words, the more often a consumer is exposed to the Brand name, it is more likely that the consumer will recall or recognize that particular Brand name in a specific situation, which can ultimately lead to viral marketing or become a determining factor in a purchase decision making process (Aaker, 1996). Therefore, findings direct the attention of Marketing practitioners to the possibilities of Instagram to increase Brand exposure: worldwide connections, open and targeted communication as well as creativity. According to the study carried out, such online constrains have a direct effect on Brand awareness.

Additionally, the empirical research uncovers that Brand Equity is supported in a wide range of opportunities by the associations the consumers can make with the brand. Brand associations are driven by Brand Identity, which on Instagram is promoted through a commonly used functions, such as *hashtags*, descriptions of the images, even the images itself and more. As discussed earlier, the study encourages Brands to employ the Brand-as-Person Brand Identity perspective for the Brand Identity implementation processes on Social Media, which are in fact focused on communication trough Brand value associations. Moreover, the results of the study suggest that Brand loyalty is the third brand element that is affected positively by the changes in online Brand Identify formation processes and is a key brand asset in the Marketing Management literature.
(Aaker, 1996). From the interviews conducted, to drive continuous consumer engagement and customer loyalty (4.3) are one of the main aims among the Brands on Instagram. Findings suggest that a number of followers indicate the reoccurring Brand “customers” and, thus, provide a way to measure the level of Brand loyalty on Social Media.

Finally, the above-mentioned findings help to evaluate the effects of the concept of virtual networks in the context of Brand Identity formation processes on Social Media. Both virtual networks and online Identity related factors are found to influence all the three earlier mentioned assets of Brand Equity. However, Brand-as-Person Brand Identity perspective turned out to be critical in order to achieve the desired outcomes, such as Brand awareness or loyalty and customer intention to share and connect with the Brand.

5.2. Managerial implications

Nowadays, among marketing practitioners, there is a common belief that Social Media leads to an increased Brand performance and, consequently, Brand Equity. The study provides empirical evidence that the effect is indeed felt on Brand Equity. However, in order to build digital identity and manage brand equity effectively, for the Marketing Managers it is important to be conscious about ways to establish online social interactions with Instagram users and, eventually, make informed decisions about brand value building activities.

First of all, findings of the research allow to define Brand-as-Person as the most appropriate Brand Identity perspective on the Social Media Platforms. To build a strong brand, Brand Managers should first consider personality features that their brand could be associated with. The findings suggest for the Brand Managers to successfully create and utilize unique hashtags in order to promote their Brand Personality on Instagram. Moreover, the findings illustrate that
most interactions on Instagram are real time and have no time or space limitations suggesting that there are even broader possibilities to connect with target audiences. In order to reach the full potential on Instagram, Marketing practitioners should have a consistent strategy for the usage of the platform. The study draws attention to considerations, such as frequency and time of interactions as well tone of voice and kind of images, which should be incorporated in the framework of Brand Identity communication and addressed according to the Personality type of the Brand. On the other hand, both theoretical discussion and empirical research indicate the possible benefits and risks of building a Brand Identity on Social Media, e.g. due to user generated content and possible viral marketing towards one’s brand on Social Media, risks occur in relation to not having full control over Brand value creation.

5.3. Limitations and further discussion

There are some limitations of the study that have to be taken into consideration. To start with, the study was conducted on a specific industry and, thus, the results cannot be generalized and should be tested in the alternative environment. Due to the differences in the nature of industries, the final conclusions might be applicable only to separate industries. Moreover, the study includes only existing Brands on the platform, assuming that such perspective gives the most valid explanation for the phenomenon under research. However, further studies should consider applying the discussion on another sample. Moreover, the case on Instagram is chosen to explore online communities on Social Media Platforms. It is not clear weather the conclusions can be applied to the other channels. Therefore, the future research should be considered on analysing online networks on alternative Social Media platforms and, eventually, test if the results can be generalized.
Another future research of visual communication through images is suggested, since it is seen to take an important role in Brand communication on Instagram. The systematic visual analysis of the image itself was not the main focus of this research, since it is believed it would have not substantially contributed to answer any of the core questions. Yet, further research of visual communication through digital images in Social Media context would give a new perspective on the online Brand Identity formation processes.

Moreover, the thesis is based on Brand perspective on emerging online communities on Instagram. There is no evidence that consumers describe personalities of brands on Instagram as well. Thus, in order to validate the Brand-as-Person approach for Identity formation in Social Media platforms, it would be reasonable to study the Brand personality concept on Social Media from the consumer point of view. The study of Brand personalities on Social Media would provide useful insights on further implications of such phenomenon.

6. Conclusion
The thesis was an attempt to investigate Brand Identity formation processes in the Online Social Media context and present the implications of such processes on the Brands. With the evolution of Internet technologies and an increased role of digitalization in general, the changes of Identity construction appeared in practices of Marketing and Management. These changes took form of sociality that combined the elements of individualism with a strong human need to connect and share with others. As a result, a new concept, described as Networked Individualism, emerged in the literature of Social Sciences. The concept was adapted by Social Media and appeared as online communities, also called networks, on Social Media platforms. Hence, online communities were brought to the attention of academic theorists and practitioners as a way to
improve Brand Identity building activities and customer relationships in Online Social Media context.

The concept and evolvement of online communities was introduced in the thesis by reviewing the changes in the conceptual Identity construction processes in relation to social structures. Relying on various conceptualizations retrieved from academic disciplines, it was concluded that the concept of online communities on social media platforms is an element of Networked Individualism, which has direct effects on Identity formation processes. Furthermore, qualitative exploration of Brands on Instagram and semi-structured interviews collected evidence that such concept has become the basis for Brand Identity formation processes on Instagram and can bring positive outcomes on Brand value creation and consumer relationships.

Moreover, the findings of the empirical research showed the ways brands interact in online communities on Instagram, which, in fact, validated the conveyed considerations of theories around Identity formation processes in Networked Individualism. In other words, findings demonstrated individual and Brand interconnectedness through the individualized online networks. The results show that connectivity, globality, engagement, personalization/customization and personal freedom are the main features of individualised networks that help build online Brand Identity and thus, establish relationship between brand and consumer. According to the theoretical conceptualizations and empirical study, social networks aim for centrality, transitivity and density of ties, which allow Brands reach target audiences on Niche Social Media and create value proposition for the customers. Other elements of Networked Individualism like the notion of timeless time, no space limitations and reflexive systems help brands express and represent what their brand stands for and consequently, strengthen Brand Identity. It helps generate a brand value proposition involving benefits, in particular emotional
and self-expressive. The study showed that in the individualized networks on Instagram, consumers automatically assigned personality to brands, which is the main aspect of consumers’ symbolic consumption and construction of oneself. Brand-as-person approach is suggested for building a strong Brand Identity in the Social Media context and improved brand-consumer relationships. Besides, in the results there is a further implication that if the Personality based approach is chosen in such context, it ultimately contributes to stronger Brand Equity, in particular Brand awareness, Brand associations and Brand loyalty.

Finally, although the thesis was one of the first attempts to provide empirical evidence to the concept of Brand Identity in relation to online communities in the context of Social Media, the findings have important implications for the academic Social Science and Marketing literature. The marketing managers and other practitioners can as well find useful implications for their Brand Identity formation strategies on Social Media. However, further studies must be carried out to fully understand the potential of such phenomenon.
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